

David DeMarco

## Authoritarianism & Personality

### Summary

Authoritarian personality types are highly susceptible to affective polarization. Authoritarianism refers to “how much people prefer conformity to authorities and norms within the groups with which they identify” (Weber). Scholars suggest that people with this attribute tend to behave in more polarizing ways. Moreover, when an authoritarian perceives that a speaker holds different values than them, they are more likely to radicalize and espouse their own values back at the speaker, rather than mix and adapt their own views. Additionally, an authoritarian would likely assume that other members of that speaker’s political party hold consistent views out of ideological consistency. Other personality traits, such as levels of aggression, fearfulness, and loyalty, all contribute to polarization as well. Antagonizing the other and pledging unwavering loyalty to one’s side naturally lead to polarized mindsets.

### Measurement & Flaws

Authoritarianism is often measured via personality surveys. By using feeling thermometers to rank how strongly people agree with authoritative practices, social psychologists are able to categorize people as either “high” or “low” authoritarian. These measurements have met criticism:

- Generalizations: The simple answers to these surveys may not discern the context and reasoning behind the respondent’s answer. While their answer may align with authoritarians, it could be for nuanced reasons not indicative of their personality.
- Gray Area: While some people are starkly authoritarian, many have lower levels and mixed personality traits, making measurement of true authoritarians difficult.

### How this explanation compares to other social-cognitive explanations:

<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Social Identity Theory &amp; Social Cognition</b>
<b>Assessment</b>	Social identity theory is the groundwork for modern day “identity politics,” where people define their values and make political opinions based on their identity. SIT scholars often use authoritarian personality theory to describe how people can form tribes around identity that close out diverse information and other lived experiences. Since authoritarians are less likely to conform to difference and are dogmatic about the norms around them, it is easy to see how these cognitive tendencies lead to people forming a strong sense of identity around their political views. Non-authoritarians have the tendency to break from traditions and tend not to follow strict social structures. Non-authoritarians tend to antagonize the current establishment and systems of power, causing them to polarize against traditional leadership.
<b>Source</b>	The Science of Politics podcast, Episode 12, “Are Americans Becoming Tribal, with Identity Politics Trumping All?” available at <a href="https://niskanencenter.org/blog/episode-12-americans-becoming-tribal-identity-politics-trumping/">https://niskanencenter.org/blog/episode-12-americans-becoming-tribal-identity-politics-trumping/</a>

<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Social Sorting &amp; Geographical Clustering</b>
<b>Assessment</b>	Social sorting theory states that people, when choosing homes and residencies, are more likely to cluster around people who have similar opinions and political viewpoints, than not. At first glance, this seems in sync with authoritarian personality theory. If authoritarians don't like to mix their political viewpoints, it makes sense that they would also tend not to mix themselves geographically. However, scholars disagree over the cause of social sorting's impact on political beliefs. While some argue that red and blue authoritarians seek out like-minded neighbors, other academics argue that environmental phenomena create issue-based factors which causes social clusters to think/behave similarly.
<b>Sources</b>	Thomson and Sussell. "Is geographic clustering driving political polarization?" Monkey Cage blog, 3/2/2015  Tullett, Alexa and Matthew Feinberg. "Are You a Liberal or a Conservative? That May Depend on Where You Live." The Monkey Cage Blog. 3/16/2017

### **Disagreements:**

- Populism Vs. Authoritarianism: While authoritarianism is associated with stability of the current regime and confiding in those currently in charge, populism is the exact opposite (Rahn, 2016). Populism is associated with groups of people who are displeased with the current elites and want change based on 'the peoples' beliefs. Nevertheless, many of Trumps populist supporters are labeled as authoritarians for their polarizing behavior. This is a contradiction: how can Trump supporters be both critical and blindly allegiant to the government? This shows that there is still not a clear-cut relationship between authoritarianism and affective polarization.
  - Rahn, Wendy and Eric Oliver. "Trump's Voters Aren't Authoritarians, New Research Says. So What Are They?" *Monkey Cage*. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/09/trumps-voters-arent-authoritarians-new-research-says-so-what-are-they/?utm\\_term=.abfc93c6def6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/09/trumps-voters-arent-authoritarians-new-research-says-so-what-are-they/?utm_term=.abfc93c6def6)
- Democrats vs. Republicans: While more Republicans tend to be authoritarians then Democrats, it is unclear which side is polarizing the other (Weber, 2017). Even though Democrats have a low rate of authoritarianism and are more willing to accept social change, they still express a fair amount of affective polarization. Scholars are unsure if there is either
  - An unknown different personality factor causing Democratic behavior, or
  - Democratic behavior is a result of perceived polarization from the authoritarian right. Essentially, it is possible that the only reason Democrats are polarizing is because they think Republicans are increasingly polarized.

- Weber, Chris, Chris Federico, and Stanley Feldman. “How authoritarianism is shaping American politics (and it’s not just about Trump)” *Monkey Cage* blog, 5/10/2017

### **Additional Works Cited:**

- Bray, R. M., & Noble, A. M. (1978). Authoritarianism and decisions of mock juries: Evidence of jury bias and group polarization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(12), 1424-1430. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.12.1424>
  - Uses case study surrounding authoritarian’s impact on jury decisions to test the relationship between personality traits and group polarization
  - As hypothesized, juries filled with high-authoritarian individuals were more likely to convict than the low-authoritarian participants. After deliberations, high-authoritarians were more likely to shift toward greater severity of punishment.
  - Finding: Authoritarians tend to polarize toward aggressive conclusions.
- Napier, Jaime L., John T. Jost. The “Antidemocratic Personality” Revisited: A Cross-National Investigation of Working-Class Authoritarianism, *Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues*, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00579.x>
- Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. J. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(3), 339-375. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.3.339